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Abraham Lincoln: The Character of a Leader

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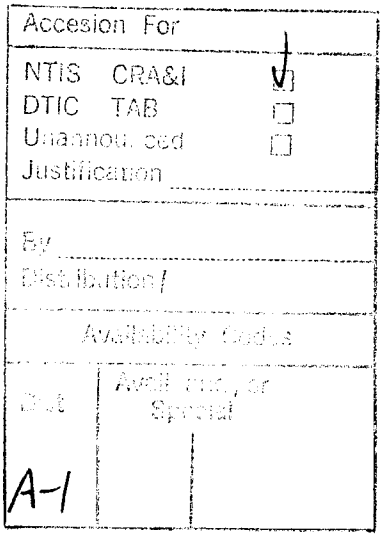

Abraham Lincoln towers over American history as no other figure, with the possible exception of George Washington. It took Washington to hold the colonies together and allow them to coalesce into the beginnings of the nation we now have. It took Abraham Lincoln to hold the nation together through the deepest crisis of its short life, and then to give it the vision for what it should and could be. In doing so he surprised many people, perhaps even himself, for he was a humble man. That he was able to do what he did in spite of tremendous opposition and, at times, discouragement, is a testament to the strength of his character, and to his ability to remain true to his convictions and not be swayed by every change in opinion.

This strength of character was a result of his faith in God. This faith gave him the foundational moral sense which guided him through the almost insoluble problems the nation faced. With the truth of God's word to sustain him he could take a stand for what was right, and not be moved. It was faith in a just and merciful God which allowed him to keep on resisting the spread of slavery because he knew that it was an affront to God, and this faith carried him through all the controversy regarding his decision to free the slaves. His faith in God undergirded his adherence to the rule of law. He knew that God had given his law to men for their own good, and he knew that a standard of conduct was good for society because men would often not choose the good when left on their own.

Abraham Lincoln did what was right because it was right. He was given the wisdom to understand how fast he could proceed and how much he could do, and he used his wisdom for the benefit of the country. He was a deep and complex man, shaped by his era but able to look beyond it to what was possible. In this paper I have only touched on a few of the major elements of his character, but from what has been shown it should be evident that his leadership sustained our nation in its darkest hour.

Abraham Lincoln

The Character of a Leader

Introduction

The name of Abraham Lincoln is one that every American knows. He is remembered as the president who freed the slaves and who led the country through the Civil War. He is the outstanding figure in American history in the nineteenth century. But how much do we really know about the man? What must his character have been to be able to do what he did and lead the country through such a terrible time as the Civil War? Other presidents have failed miserably when faced with much less dire circumstances.

This paper attempts to reveal the key elements of Lincoln's character. In approaching this task I will describe the condition in which the nation found itself in the first half of the nineteenth century. Having set the backdrop, I will examine the character of Abraham Lincoln as revealed by his own words and actions. In this way I hope to show how it was that he was able to rise above the trials he faced and lead the nation out of a dark and contentious time set it on the path to a bright new future.

Background

Abraham Lincoln was born February 12, 1809, just 22 years after the drafting of the Constitution of the United States and 20 years after the inauguration of George Washington as the first president. This is important to remember because Lincoln was shaped by the time in which he lived. His vision for what the United States should be,

and would become, grew out of the circumstances of that time. I emphasize this point because I believe that one of the most common mistakes which people make when analyzing individuals or events from a time other than their own is to do so from their own perspective, rather than that of the person or event being considered. Specifically, to truly understand Lincoln's decisions and actions, and the reasoning which supported them, one must make every attempt to understand the political and social culture in which Lincoln lived and acted. Without this understanding any discussion of his vision for America would be meaningless. Today's norms and values are essentially irrelevant in the context of the early nineteenth century.

When Lincoln was born the United States consisted of seventeen states; when he was inaugurated president there were thirty-four states—the Union had doubled in size. He saw two more states join the Union while he was president. Until Lincoln was well along in years the nation's borders were not set—the Pacific Ocean was the natural western boundary, but the northern and southern limits of the nation had yet to be determined. Every person living in the United States had as a fundamental presupposition of their conception of the nation the fact that it was expanding and that its final shape and nature were still being formed. In many respects the United States was like a pubescent child—growing rapidly, a little awkward, full of energy and promise, but still uncertain as to what it would be and when it would be full grown. Lincoln shared this presupposition with every other American, and as he grew up he saw the nation grow with him.

From our perspective at the end of the 20th century the character of the nation seems fairly well settled. Americans of 1994, while diverse politically as well as ethnically, share a common understanding of the unity of the nation and of the fundamental principle of liberty for all men that was not present in ante bellum America. In that era loyalties were often to the state first and to the country second. One has only to look at the decision of Robert E. Lee to choose his state of Virginia over the United States when the Civil War broke out to see how strongly state loyalties were felt. His example was followed thousands of times as men took up arms for their states and women urged them to do so.

The question of the nature and application of liberty was also unsettled. Most people agreed intellectually with the words of the Declaration of Independence that "all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness," yet in practice there was no consensus on how they should be applied. Just as when the Constitution was written, a significant number of people living in the United States were considered property and accorded no rights at all. This issue had proven to be one of the hardest to resolve when the Constitution was framed, and in the years since it had become an increasingly contentious issue.

Another significant difference between then and now is the way the United States views itself in relation to the rest of the world. The only enemy which threatened was Mexico, and it caused very little anxiety. The concern of the nation was inward, not outward. Even the conflict with Mexico had to do with the settling of

the nation—the territory it would call its own—and not with any international issues. Today we are used to thinking of the United States as the sole super-power, the major player in the community of nations. Then the United States was still relatively weak when compared to the European nations, both militarily and diplomatically. Moreover, that was the way the country expected it to be and thought it should be. There was no desire to be involved internationally—just the desire to be left alone and the intention to leave the rest of the world alone.

It is difficult today to understand a nation so different from what it has become, yet it was the nation of Abraham Lincoln and one should understand it as much as possible to understand him. He was a product of his time who managed to see beyond the horizon to a vision of what the nation should be, and would, with his help, become.

Slavery

An essential step which one must make when seeking to understand the political and social culture in which Lincoln lived and which shaped his thinking is to understand, as fully as possible, the institution of slavery as it existed in America. To Americans of the late twentieth century slavery is a remote fact of history—regrettable, but long vanished from the American economy. From an historical perspective, however, our nation still has seen more years of its life as a slave-holding nation than as one in which all men have enjoyed the same freedoms. Slaves were brought to Virginia as early as 1619.[1] However, "with the rise of the plantation

[1] Robert Roswell Palmer and Joel Colton, *A History of the Modern World* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1992), 261.

economy after 1650, and especially after 1700, it became a fundamental economic institution."[2] Slavery had been firmly established in America for over 130 years before the Constitution was written and adopted. It was absolutely essential to the cotton growing economy of the South. The wealth of the southern plantation owners was vested in two things: their land and their slaves. And it is vital to understanding the ante bellum culture to comprehend the fact that slaves were property—extremely valuable property—and that they were dealt with as one deals with property. They were a capital asset, essential to production, in the same way that combines, trucks, and tractors are capital assets used in production by the grain farmers of the central plains today.

Although the institution of slavery made the cotton economy of the South possible, it also put the South at a disadvantage compared to the North. The "mass of subservient and virtually uncompensated labor"[3] made it impossible for a free man to compete economically in the South. Consequently, European immigration was concentrated almost exclusively in the North. This vast influx of people willing to work hard to realize their own dreams of freedom provided an able workforce for the Industrial Revolution which was taking place. The North became, more and more, a competitor to England in trade for manufactured goods, while the South was essentially a trade associate since it produced the raw material for the English textile industry.

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., 570.

All the while the economic aspects of slavery were being exploited, the moral conscience of the Western world was becoming increasingly troubled by it. In spite of its place in the economy and its long history in the country, the people who were to form the United States had never accepted slavery whole-heartedly. There was uneasy accommodation made for it in the development of our Constitution, but I don't believe that any one of the founding fathers thought that they had resolved the issue. The heated arguments concerning the treatment of slaves and the slave trade at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 illustrate the moral element of the issue of slavery. The accommodations of slavery which were included in the Constitution were compromises that were only accepted in order to be able to complete a constitution. George Mason—author of the Virginia Bill of Rights, convention delegate, plantation and slave owner—was "openly and urgently abolitionist (at the Convention); he wished to see all slaves freed.".[4] His situation illustrates the moral dilemma which the whole south faced: as one who depended on slavery for his livelihood, as strongly as he wished to free his slaves, he could not without facing complete economic ruin. Mason's dilemma constituted a perfect analogy for the situation the country faced in trying to decide how to deal with the slave-based economy of the South. So much of its wealth and means of production was vested in slaves that slavery could not be abolished without destroying the South's economy as well. Even if it had been possible for compensation to have been made to everyone who owned slaves, the cotton economy of the South, indeed, its very way of life, would have been lost with the abolition of the institution. It seemed to be a problem without a solution. Even if the

[4] Catherine Drinker Bowen, *Miracle at Philadelphia* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1966), 95.

whole country agreed that it needed to go, it couldn't figure out how to do it—and the country was by no means agreed that slavery had to go.

These two factors—the growing moral indignation against slavery and the increasing economic dependence on it—were pulling the country in opposite directions. Some in the North felt that it was enough of an evil that it should be abolished, no matter what the cost. Others resented the additional representation which the South enjoyed based on the constitutional formula which granted proportional representation "among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons."[5] Still others advocated some type of gradual emancipation which would eventually lead to the elimination of the institution.

On the opposite side were those who supported slavery as being both economically necessary and morally justified. They felt that it was a key to prosperity and should be used wherever possible. The prominent Southern Presbyterian theologians James Henley Thornwell and Robert Lewis Dabney made biblical arguments in support of the practice of slavery. They, along with many others, held that the Bible never specifically condemns slavery, and, therefore, slavery should not be a moral question but one of property rights. In this they were undoubtedly influenced by the prevailing Southern culture, for nothing in the Bible or Christian

[5] *Constitution*, art. I, sec. 2.

teaching allows one person to own another as one owns property. The fact that such learned Christian men could have so significant a blind spot regarding this issue serves to illustrate the depths of emotion and devotion to culture which the South brought to the discussion of slavery.

So strong had feelings become at both ends of the spectrum, and so polarized was the country's population, that slavery became the dominating political issue in the country from the Missouri Comprise of 1820 until the Civil War provided its final resolution. This aspect of the politics of slavery had its beginning in the Ordinance of 1787, in which Virginia ceded the Northwest Territories to the United States, and which contained language which prohibited admission of slavery to the Territories, or to any states formed out of them. The balance in the nation in the first half of the nineteenth century was such that even the admission of states had to be accomplished on the basis of one slave state admitted for every free state that joined the Union. In 1850 California was admitted to the Union as a free state without an off-setting slave state. The reason this was possible was because the free state legislators agreed to support the Fugitive Slave Act in return for the South accepting California. This compromise only served to exacerbate the tensions between the two regions of the country. When the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 effectively repealed the Missouri Comprise the nation was further aroused. By 1860 the situation had deteriorated to the point that both Northerners and Southerners viewed the South as distinctly different from the rest of the country. Many on both sides wondered if it was even possible for North and South to coexist as members of one Union.

The above discussion of the slavery issue is lengthy, but absolutely essential to the understanding of the condition of the country in the middle of the nineteenth century. It was the dominating element of the political and social climate into which Abraham Lincoln was born into and which shaped his thought. He knew his country as one in which some individuals owned people as property, and other individuals condemned those who did on grounds of morality and decency. He saw the bitterness of the sectional disputes, and he saw the Union experience crisis which brought it to the brink of dissolution in 1820 and again in 1850 over the issue of slavery. Scholars and rationalizers, then and now, talk of states rights and the nature and power of central government, but the real, gut-level, heart-rending issue was slavery—and Lincoln knew it, unequivocally.

Abraham Lincoln was personally opposed to slavery on moral grounds all his life. We can only speculate as to how his childhood and youth taught him to abhor it. We do know, without a doubt, that beginning with the earliest parts of his public life he spoke out against it. In March of 1837, while a member of the Illinois Legislature, he went on record to say that he believed "that the institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy."[6] He was not content to merely critique its basis, he went after the institution. "I confess myself as belonging to that class in the country who contemplate slavery as a moral, social, and political evil."[7] Throughout his speeches and letters he over and again expresses his belief that the writers of the

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[6] *Abraham Lincoln: Complete Works,* ed. John G. Nicolay and John Hay, vol. 1 (New York: The Century Co., 1894), 15.

[7] Ibid., 1:442.

Constitution expected slavery to gradually disappear from America, as he did in his early life. He said, in a July 10, 1858 speech at Chicago, Illinois,

> *I always believed that everybody was against it, and that it was in course of ultimate extinction. ...the great mass of the nation have rested in the belief that slavery was in course of ultimate extinction. They had reason so to believe.*
>
> *The adoption of the Constitution and its attendant history led the people to believe so, and that such was the belief of the framers of the Constitution itself. Why did those old men, about the time of the adoption of the Constitution, decree that slavery should not go into the new Territory, where it had not already gone? Why declare that within twenty years the African slave-trade, by which slaves are supplied, might be cut off by Congress? Why were all these acts? I might enumerate more of these acts—but enough. What were they but a clear indication that the framers of the Constitution intended and expected the ultimate extinction of that institution?*[8]

About the time of the Fugitive Slave Act and the admission of California as a free state, Lincoln realized that slavery was not going to disappear by itself. The economy of the South had developed such a dependence on it that it could not give it up. Along with the economic dependence, Southerners held to a philosophical position that slavery was morally permissible. This position hardened considerably in the years

[8] Ibid., 1:252–253.

leading up to the Civil War. Lincoln recognized that the proponents of slavery would not be content with merely holding their own, they wanted to see it expanded into new territory. Lincoln, along with most of the country outside of the South, was not willing to allow that to happen. He recognized that the situation had to be resolved. As he said in 1858 and repeated many times,

> *"A house divided against itself cannot stand." I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward till it shall become alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new, North as well as South.*[9]

The controversy had grown beyond the issue of slavery to one which had to do with the fundamental nature of the United States.

Just as the controversy in the country had broadened and become more complex, Lincoln's view toward the problem of slavery and how to deal with it had grown more nuanced and thoughtful. He had always believed it to be wrong, but, as noted above, he thought that it would gradually be eliminated. That, obviously, was not going to happen. The people of the United States were not willing, at that point in

[9] Ibid., 1:240.

time, to concede merit to any position other than their own—pro or con. Lincoln had not lost any of his moral repugnance for the institution, if anything, he was even more conscious of the evils inherent in slavery. However, he also knew that it was an issue which could cause the country to break apart unless it was handled with great wisdom and care.

If Abraham Lincoln had been able to devise and implement a solution to the problem of slavery without the intervention of the Civil War, he would have followed the policies which he believed the Founding Fathers favored. Slavery had always been a contentious issue in America, beginning with its arrival on the continent. The longest period of relative peace over the question of slavery was the time from the adoption of the Constitution until 1820, the year of the Missouri Compromise. Lincoln attributed this peace to the restrictions which had been placed on the institution of slavery. As he remarked in a speech at Columbus, Ohio on September 16, 1859:

> *From the adoption of the Constitution down to 1820 is the precise period of our history when we had comparative peace upon this question—the precise period of time when we came nearer to having peace about it than any other time of that entire one hundred and sixty years, ... or of the eighty years of our own Constitution. It would be worth our while to stop and examine into the probable reason of our coming nearer to having peace then than at any other time. This was the precise period of time in which our fathers adopted, and during which they followed, a policy restricting the spread of slavery, and the*

whole Union was acquiescing in it. The whole country looked forward to the ultimate extinction of the institution. It was when a policy had been adopted and was prevailing, which led all just and right-minded men to suppose that slavery was gradually coming to an end, and that they might be quiet about it, watching it as it expired.[10]

If Abraham Lincoln had been able to serve as president without being forced to prosecute a civil war, his policy toward slavery would have been built on the premise outlined by him in the above speech. He would have, I believe, sought to repeal the Kansas-Nebraska Act and introduced legislation to counteract the effects of the Dred Scot decision (which had effectively allowed unrestricted importation of slaves into territories which had not yet been organized into states). He would have restricted slavery to those states where it already existed and then gradually increased the pressure on them until it was finally abolished. Stephen Douglas recognized this and attempted to use it against Lincoln:

His idea is that he will prohibit slavery in all the Territories, and thus force them all to become free States, surrounding the slaves States with a cordon of free States and hemming them in, keeping the slaves confined to their present limits whilst they go on multiplying until the soil on which they live will no longer feed them, and he will thus be able to put slavery in a course of ultimate extinction by starvation.[11]

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[10] Ibid., 1:543.

[11] Ibid., 1:517.

This policy may very well have worked. The majority of the people in the country believed that slavery was wrong, and many of them recognized that the United States' moral standing in the world was suffering, especially since the other Western nations had abolished slavery. If put to a popular vote it would probably have been defeated, however, the Southern states enjoyed a disproportionate amount of power in the Congress and on the Supreme Court and were able to overcome efforts to limit slavery in any way.

Even though the Civil War forced Abraham Lincoln to deal with slavery in a more radical manner than he would have liked, elements of his preferred solution were evident. In fact, in his annual message to Congress of December 1, 1862, he proposed a plan which would provide for the gradual, compensated emancipation of all slaves not already freed by the Emancipation Proclamation (which would take effect on January 1, 1863) by the end of the century.[12] As much as he desired to see slavery ended, his first concern was for the country. Accordingly, he made every effort possible to keep as many states with the Union as he could. Lincoln was criticized at the time for moving too slowly in freeing the slaves, and there are those today who claim that, before and after the Emancipation Proclamation, he acted purely out of expediency and not out of principle. They are wrong. His overriding concern was to restore the Union, and he made that his first principle. He did not immediately free all the slaves because he knew he couldn't enforce the order and he also knew that if he did he would lose to the Confederacy the border states that still remained loyal to the

[12] Ibid., 2:270–272.

Union. He said as much in a letter of April 4, 1864: "I did understand, however, that my oath to preserve the Constitution to the best of my ability imposed upon me the duty of preserving, by every indispensable means, that government—that nation, of which that Constitution was the organic law."[13] When emancipation became possible in view of the whole war effort, he did it. When the border states loyal to the Union declined to accept compensated emancipation for their slaves, he accomplished it anyway by drafting the slaves for the Union Army and assuring their freedom after their service. He first had to preserve the nation, and having preserved it, could take the necessary measures to ensure liberty to all its inhabitants.

Law

Abraham Lincoln held strong convictions regarding the issue of slavery, and, without a doubt, it was the issue which overshadowed everything else. There were, however, other aspects to Lincoln's character which helped to define him as a man and as president. When one reads Lincoln's speeches and letters, one of the convictions which is evident from the beginning is the high regard he holds for the rule of law. In one of his first public speeches, an address to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois on January 27, 1837, he made this issue the primary focus of his remarks. In fact, he saw the lack of regard for the law as one of the primary dangers to the country—much more of a threat than anything external. At the time he gave this address the country had seen a number of incidents in which citizens had taken the law into their own hands rather than wait for the judicial process. Lincoln remarked:

[13] Ibid., 2:508.

I hope I am over wary; but if I am not, there is even now something of ill omen amongst us. I mean the increasing disregard for law which pervades the country—the growing disposition to substitute the wild and furious passions in lieu of the sober judgment of courts, and the worse than savage mobs for the executive ministers of justice. This disposition is awfully fearful in any community.[14]

He went on to describe several incidents around the country in which mobs had dispensed vigilante justice, and then pointed out the danger to the nation if this pattern continued:

Whenever this effect shall be produced among us; whenever the vicious portion of population shall be permitted to gather in bands of hundreds and thousands, and burn churches, ravage and rob provision-stores, throw printing presses into rivers, shoot editors, and hang and burn obnoxious persons at pleasure and with impunity, depend on it, this government cannot last. By such things the feelings of the best citizens will become more or less alienated from it, and thus it will be left without friends, or with too few, and those few too weak to make their friendship effectual. At such a time, and under such circumstances, men of sufficient talent and ambition will not be wanting to seize the opportunity, strike the blow, and overturn that fair

[14] Ibid., 1:9.

fabric which for the last half century has been the fondest hope of the lovers of freedom throughout the world.[15]

He saw that lawlessness which took away one's security in his life or property could bring about disrespect for government, leading to alienation and the opportunity for ambitious men to over-turn it. Having identified this threat, Lincoln asked, " 'How shall we fortify against it?' The answer is simple. "Let every American, every lover of liberty, every well-wisher to his posterity swear by the blood of the Revolution never to violate in the least particular the laws of the country, and never to tolerate their violation by others."[16] He admitted that bad laws existed, but he stressed the need to observe even those until they could be repealed through lawful process. He emphasized strongly his belief that the preservation of the Republic depended on the rule of law, with the Constitution at the foundation.[17]

Lincoln's high regard for the law formed the basis for many of the positions he held throughout his life. Even in the case of the Dred Scot decision—which he disagreed with—he upheld the authority of the law and the necessity of working through the system to change the decision. He believed that slavery was wrong, and bad for the nation, but he did not support efforts to deal with it which went outside the law, as Abolitionists did.

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[15] Ibid., 1:11.

[16] Ibid., 1:12.

[17] Ibid., 1:14–15.

The question of respect for law and legal process was a factor in one of the first controversies of Lincoln's federal service. He was elected to the House of Representatives and seated as a member in December, 1847. At that time the United States was at war with Mexico. This war was the subject of a great deal of controversy, both in Congress and with the general public. It had started in 1846 with a border incident in which, according to President James K. Polk, the Mexican army had crossed into United States' territory and "shed American blood on American soil."[18] He announced to Congress that "War exists, and, notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself."[19] His message to Congress asked them to comply with the Constitution and formally declare a war that was already in progress. In other words, the country was committed to war and Congress was asked to go along with a decision that had already been made.[20]

Abraham Lincoln, along with many others, questioned the necessity for, and the legality of, the Mexican War. They opposed the war because the administration was not able to show that it met the *jus ad bellum*[21] test of a legal war. The incident took place on land which was located between the Rio Grande and Nueces Rivers. The status of this territory was, at the time of the incident, rather ambiguous. At one time the Spanish government set the boundary at the Nueces River, but since then

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[18] Samuel Eliot Morison, Frederick Merk, and Frank Freidel, *Dissent in Three American Wars* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 35.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Justice of war; the argument that the legality of a war depended on several conditions, one of which is that the nation has not acted as an aggressor against another's territory.

Mexico had rebelled against Spain and achieved independence, then Texas had rebelled against Mexico and established her independence. Texas existed as an independent nation for a short period of time before entering the Union as the twenty-eighth state. Texas claimed the Rio Grande as the boundary with Mexico. In fact, the issue of the location of the boundary between the United States and Mexico had never been decided.

Lincoln and the others opposed to the war with Mexico based their opposition on their belief that the president had not been truthful with Congress or the people regarding the national status of the site of the initial skirmish. If the territory was not part of the United States then we were aggressors by having our army there. According to international law, as it had been recognized since medieval times, aggression against another state is illegal. In a speech made to the House of Representatives on January 12, 1848, Lincoln made this issue his whole focus. He said,

> *The President, in his first war message of May, 1846, declares that the soil was ours on which hostilities were commenced by Mexico, and he repeats that declaration almost in the same language in each successive annual message, thus showing that he deems that point a highly essential one. In the importance of that point I entirely agree with the President. To my judgment it is the very point upon which he should be justified, or condemned.*[22]

[22] *Abraham Lincoln: Complete Works,* 1:101.

He then went on to argue that the president had not proven his point and, furthermore, he suggested that the administration was more interested in acquiring territory from Mexico than in self-defense. While Lincoln acknowledged the desirability of the territory in question, he opposed the methods being used to make it part of the United States[23] . He believed that the nation, and its leaders, had the same responsibility to adhere to the law as did individuals.[24]

In his first inaugural address, Abraham Lincoln revealed the manner in which the law informed his understanding of the nature of the nation. "I hold that, in contemplation of universal law and of the Constitution, the Union of these States is perpetual. Perpetuity is implied, if not expressed, in the fundamental law of all national governments."[25] If a nation could allow itself to be partially dismembered, it would be no nation at all, but rather an association which existed at the pleasure of its constituent parts. But granting even that, for the sake of argument, Lincoln goes on to say, "if the United States be not a government proper, but an association of States in the nature of contract merely, can it, as a contract, be peaceably unmade by less than all the parties who made it? One party to a contract may violate it—break it, so to speak; but does it not require all to lawfully rescind it?" He saw the secession of the

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[23] Ibid. 1:102–107.

[24] In all honesty, I have to say that even though Lincoln's arguments against the war were valid, and his questions merited honest answers from the administration, I can't help but suspect that there was a strong political motivation as well. Lincoln, and most of the others opposed to the war, were not in the same political party as President Polk and many of the defenders of the war. He may have seen this not only as an issue of legality, but also as an opportunity to put the president on the defensive and score some significant points against the opposition party. Among Lincoln's strengths was the fact that he was an accomplished politician.

[25] Ibid., 2:3.

Southern States as not only rebellion against the North, but as clearly illegal action, an affront to his sense of respect for the rule of law.

Finally, in respect to Abraham Lincoln's attitude toward the law, one must look at his decision to suspend the writ of *habeus corpus.* He exercised this early in his presidency, but on a very limited basis, and only out of necessity. Over the course of the war he expanded the suspension as necessary to restrain those who attempted to undermine the Union. For this he was excoriated in some circles for what was viewed as his arbitrary denial of a fundamental right. He pointed out that the very people who were attempting to overthrow the Constitution looked to it as the guarantee of their attempts to do so. Referring to his decision to suspend the writ, Lincoln said, "are all the laws but one to go unexecuted, and the government itself go to pieces lest that one be violated?"[26] He also pointed out many times that the Constitution itself provided for the suspension of the writ of *habeus corpus* "when in Cases of Rebellion or Invasion the public Safety may require it."[27] It would be hard to imagine a time which would be appropriate for its exercise. The law, in Lincoln's eyes, was to be held in the highest esteem, and he adhered to it through a period of service that encompassed the greatest threat to the United States that the country has ever seen.

Personal Faith

Underlying all of Abraham Lincoln's attitudes and convictions was the bedrock of a deep personal faith in God. In this secular age considerations of a religious nature

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[26] Ibid., 2:61.

[27] Constitution, art. I, sec. 9.

tend to be ignored or glossed over. To do so in the case of Lincoln would be to leave out of consideration the element which formed the foundation of his character. It was his faith in God and reliance on divine providence which gave him the personal strength to continue even when the situation seemed the most bleak. One has only to look at the record of public proclamations issued by President Lincoln to see how deeply he looked to God for the good of the nation. In a Proclamation of a National Fast-Day, August 12, 1861 he confessed:

> *When our own beloved country, once, by the blessing of God, united, prosperous, and happy, is now afflicted with faction and civil war, it is peculiarly fit for us to recognize the hand of God in this terrible visitation, and in sorrowful remembrance of our own faults and crimes as a nation and as individuals, to humble ourselves before him and to pray for his mercy—to pray that we may be spared further punishment, though most justly deserved; that our arms may be blessed and made effectual for the reestablishment of law, order, and peace throughout the wide extent of our country; and that the inestimable boon of civil and religious liberty, earned under his guidance and blessing by the labors and sufferings of our fathers, may be restored in all its original excellence.*[28]

At the beginning of his presidency, which was also the beginning of the war, he threw himself and the nation on the mercy of God. His reliance on God continued over the

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[28] *Abraham Lincoln: Complete Works*, 2:73–74.

course of the war, and he recognized that the sins of the nation may have been cause for divine punishment. As he said in his Proclamation Appointing a National Fast-Day of March 30, 1863,

> *And whereas, it is the duty of nations as well as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God; to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and t recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord:*
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> *And insomuch as we know that by his divine law nations, like individuals, are subjected to punishments and chastisements in this world, may we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war which now desolates the land may be but a punishment inflicted upon us for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole people?*[29]

The words above foreshadow one of the most eloquent and moving statements of Abraham Lincoln's entire public career, when he expressed his hope for the nation and trust in God in his second inaugural address:

> *Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of*

[29] Ibid., 2:319.

unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."[30]

These few examples of Lincoln's public expressions of faith merely touch the surface of a whole lifetime of trust in God. Throughout his letters, speeches, and personal reflections is evidence of his reliance on God, and confidence in his providential work in himself, as well as in the nation. Biographers relate anecdotes of Lincoln being heard supplicating God for mercy and deliverance for the nation. He looked to God for wisdom and strength to lead the country through the crisis, and his prayers were answered. Lincoln's faith carried him through the trial, and with him the nation. It gave him the foundation on which to base his conviction that slavery was morally reprehensible, and that the rule of law was essential for the good of the country. It was the bedrock of his character.

Lincoln's Vision for the Nation

The historian James M. McPherson has characterized the Civil Was as a Second American Revolution.[31] He cites three elements which confer on the war the character of a revolution. He says, first, that it was a revolution because the southern leaders frequently invoked the right of revolution as justification for their secession;

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[30] Ibid., 2:657.

[31] James M. McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

secondly, that it achieved the abolition of slavery, even though that was not part of Lincoln's war aims; and, finally, it was a revolution because it destroyed not only slavery but also the social structure of the old South that had been founded on slavery, and it radically altered the power balance between the North and the South.[32]

This analysis is accurate, however I would like to quibble slightly with McPherson's conclusion that it was a Second Revolution. I believe that a more precise way to view the Civil War is as the continuation of the revolutionary process which formed the nation. Throughout the history of the colonies is the gradual trend that drew them closer and closer together. The Revolutionary War, which resulted in our breaking away from England, is rightly identified as a critical event, but even so, it was only one event in a sequence of events which gave shape to the nation. The formation and adoption of the Constitution continued the shaping process, but it left some questions unanswered, such as the nature of the relationship between the Federal Government and the States, and the question of slavery. In the years between the adoption of the Constitution and the outbreak of the Civil War, these questions had been debated but no permanent solutions were found. It was the Civil War which provided the answer to them and gave the country its final shape.

Abraham Lincoln was essential to this process. His focus included the issues of the day, but it went beyond them. He understood that slavery had to go—that with the way the world was changing, and the way sentiments were developing in the United States, trying to hold on to the institution would doom the nation as surely as would

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[32] Ibid., 25, 29, 37.

secession, if it were allowed to stand. He also understood that Thomas Jefferson's view of an idyllic rural nation of gentlemen farmers was unworkable. Immigrants were pouring in from Europe, and the continent was being populated from coast to coast. He sensed the boundless energy of the nation and, even with the terrible effects of the Civil War, sought to teach its people to look to what was possible, and not at what they were going through. He, more than anyone before him, saw the necessary final shape and structure of the United States, and he gave his vision to the country as his legacy.

Conclusion

Abraham Lincoln towers over American history as no other figure, with the possible exception of George Washington. It took Washington to hold the colonies together and allow them to coalesce into the beginnings of the nation we now have. It took Abraham Lincoln to hold the nation together through the deepest crisis of its short life, and then to give it the vision for what it should and could be. In doing so he surprised many people, perhaps even himself, for he was a humble man. That he was able to do what he did in spite of tremendous opposition and, at times, discouragement, is a testament to the strength of his character, and to his ability to remain true to his convictions and not be swayed by every change in opinion.

This strength of character was a result of his faith in God. This faith gave him the foundational moral sense which guided him through the almost insoluble problems the nation faced. With the truth of God's word to sustain him he could take a stand for

what was right, and not be moved. It was faith in a just and merciful God which allowed him to keep on resisting the spread of slavery because he knew that it was an affront to God, and this faith carried him through all the controversy regarding his decision to free the slaves. His faith in God undergirded his adherence to the rule of law. He knew that God had given his law to men for their own good, and he knew that a standard of conduct was good for society because men would often not choose the good when left on their own.

Abraham Lincoln did what was right because it was right. He was given the wisdom to understand how fast he could proceed and how much he could do, and he used his wisdom for the benefit of the country. He was a deep and complex man, shaped by his era but able to look beyond it to what was possible. In this paper I have only touched on a few of the major elements of his character, but from what has been shown it should be evident that his leadership sustained our nation in its darkest hour.

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